CURATING EUROPEAN TELEVISION HISTORY ONLINE

Video Active and the challenges of creating access to television content from the archive[1]

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Uneven access to television archives across Europe has posed a number of problems for transnational and historical comparison. Developments in online technologies have promised new opportunities for creating access to television content at national and international levels, yet the potential for transnational comparison remains problematic. This chapter focuses on Video Active, a major European collaboration between broadcasters, archives, technologists and television scholars to create online access to television programming and to promote comparative approaches to television history, which ran between September 2006 and August 2009. The chapter will illustrate, however, a number of factors that can inhibit online access to television content, and it will show how classificatory schemes and metadata can influence the pre-selection, interpretation and comparison of accessible programming. It will go on to explore how the project developed practical solutions to some of these issues and will suggest that continued collaboration on a larger scale may yet hold the long-term answers to problems of access and interpretation.

There have for a long time been a number of barriers to researching and studying television programmes and television history in Europe. These barriers, often familiar enough to the television (or media) scholar seeking to understand the history of the medium in their home territory, relate to access to archive content and data such as cataloguing information, written documents or actual programmes themselves.[2] In most European countries there has been no centralised state legislation or provision of television archive content or documentation for researchers, students or the general public. The problems associated with access to television archive content and documentation become more acute, however, when trying to historically analyse or study television comparatively across European borders. Access becomes even more difficult when the archive is based in a different country, with complex and varied access rights and conditions, and with programme content, cataloguing and documentation in a foreign language.

Now, however, innovations in digital and web-based technologies, as well as developments in asset management and semantic technologies that allow the storage and retrieval of content, are making increased access to archive television possible for a wide range of users. In the UK, for example, there are a number of projects that have created access to a wealth of television material for education, academic research and business-to-business communities. In the area of education and research these include the British Film Institute's Screenonline which aims to provide an 'online encyclopaedia of film and television',[3] using clips of material from the BFI National Archive, and the Newsfilm Online project, run and hosted by the British Universities Film and Video Council (BUFVC), which aims to provide over 3,000 hours of news footage.[4] In the business-to-business sector, the Arrows project has been set up initially to create subscription-based access to 25,000 television advertisements as a research resource for 'creatives' and advertising executives.[5] In continental Europe both the Institut National de l'Audiovisuel (INA) in France and the Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision (S&V), for example, have also placed a large amount of television content online for a range of researchers, educators, media professionals and general users.[6]

Yet national level projects such as these do not necessarily create transnational access or understanding. The moving image content of Screenonline and Newsfilm Online is only available to UK educational or public institutions via registration or licensing arrangements and the supporting information is only understandable to users who can read English. Similarly, the INA and S&V content is accessible via variable free access, licensing and purchasing arrangements, but its content and supporting information is only searchable and retrievable in French and Dutch respectively.

On the other hand, YouTube has provided a more transnational space for the delivery of television content. Content can be uploaded from around the world and users can set their country and language filters to search for programmes and clips from different territories. The usability of such content for education and research (and transnational comparison), however, is partly determined by its provenance. For example, numerous institutions ranging from charities, non-governmental organisations, archives and broadcasters have set up channels on YouTube for the display of moving image content. This includes the BFI Films channel, which provides a showcase for numerous short films from the BFI National Archive supported with rich contextual information (although, as above, this is only accessible in English). Much of this film content is actuality footage, and free from rights restrictions, or short film clips to promote BFI products and services. Television content remains problematic, however, and the BBC YouTube channel, which shows clips from BBC television programmes, is restricted to users in the UK only.

On a much broader level, YouTube provides the space for users to upload television content that they have captured on home video recording formats. This has provided access to a wide range of content that has traditionally proved inaccessible through formal means, such as programmes, promos, music videos and advertisements. The problem for academic researchers, educational and business users, however, is that user-supplied content is a fickle and unpredictable friend. First, programme information tends to be weak and unreliable. Second, the recording quality of content is often poor. Third, the very informal nature of user-supply is that content is often removed for a variety of rights reasons. So consistency becomes a real problem for the professional user because there is no guarantee that the content will be there

from one day to the next. In any event, irrespective of whether the researcher or educator accesses channel or user-supplied content, YouTube has not been designed with transnational, comparative or analytical search functionalities or classificatory schemes in mind.

Recent European level initiatives have, however, demonstrated the potential for broadcasters and archives to deliver high quality digitised content – supported by contextualised information and search functionalities operating across different languages – that supports and promotes comparative analysis. The BIRTH of TV project, the first of these, funded by the European Union (EU) Media Plus programme, was a broadcaster-led initiative to explore the early history of television in Europe to coincide with the 50th anniversary of a number of television services. As a modest pilot project, running from January 2003 to December 2005, BIRTH demonstrated the potential of broadcasters, archives and technology providers to cooperate across borders. Comprised of five broadcasters and archives (BBC, ORF, RTBF, S&V and SWR) and two technology partners, the project created access to over 700 items of archive content, including both moving image clips and still images. BIRTH also supported content with information about the early history of television in Europe and, accessible in four languages (English, French, Dutch and German), it has demonstrated that it is possible to devise multilingual search and retrieval functionalities that facilitate the transnational comparison and understanding of content.[7]

It is within this context of emergent web technologies and international cooperation that a new project was developed to create transnational access to a large body of television content from across Europe. The Video Active project, running from September 2006 to August 2009, was very much established as a successor to the BIRTH project, building on the technical know-how developed in that earlier project and with a much larger consortium of project partners.[8] Under the leadership of the University of Utrecht and the Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision (S&V), Video Active was developed and funded by the EU eContentplus programme to create transnational and multilingual access to 10,000 items of digitised programme content and to support this with rich metadata and production information. As well as creating access, the project was strongly aimed at promoting and facilitating a comparative understanding of the development of

television across Europe and at exploring the ways the medium has shaped 'collective European memory and identity'.[9] While information in the project was mostly displayed in English, the official language of the EU, the inclusion of a multilingual thesaurus and the semantic mapping and integration of information meant that searches could be undertaken across the range of languages included in the project and across a variety of different metadata fields and classificatory schemes. So Video Active constituted a significant and strategic intervention in the development of television history across Europe. It created access to content that had previously been unavailable to researchers and educators, it provided contextual information for understanding and interpreting television content, and its use of multilingual and semantic technologies made comparison of television across Europe possible for the first time in an extensive and structured way.

It was no accident that Video Active's comparative imperative corresponded to a burgeoning interest in comparative television history across Europe. The project's manager, Professor Sonja de Leeuw at the University of Utrecht, was instrumental in founding the European Television History Network (ETHN) with Andreas Fickers in 2004. This network has brought numerous television historians together at meetings and workshops for dialogue and knowledge exchange, and it led to a number of crossovers between the Video Active project and the academic community. First, it led to the direct involvement of Royal Hollo-way, University of London (RHUL) in the project as the partner leading the development of selection and editorial strategies for programme content and contextual information. Second, the project used the ETHN as a consultative community on content selection, and it was under the auspices of Video Active that RHUL organised the 'Rethinking Television Histories: Digitising Europe's Televisual Heritage' conference, held in London in April 2007. Third, meetings of the ETHN resulted directly in the innovative and collaboratively written volume *A European Television History*, edited by Jonathan Bignell and Andreas Fickers. This important volume laid the groundwork for a number of comparative approaches to television history in Europe and, as such, provided a rationale and potential appetite for Video Active content. Fourth, it led to the special edition of the *Media History* journal – drawn

from and inspired by papers presented at the Rethinking Television Histories conference – out of which this volume has evolved.

Yet despite these innovative and exciting developments, the design of the content selection policy for Video Active highlighted the conceptual and practical problems that creating online access to programme material entails. While new media technologies have been regularly and popularly hailed as providing new and revolutionary forms of access to content across platforms and converged media, Video Active has shown that the availability, selection and interpretation of content is circumscribed by a range of real-world practical, financial, technical and legal issues. Furthermore, the project highlights a number of comparative and historiographical problems relating to how material is classified and catalogued, and the implications this has for selection and interpretation of content. The rest of this chapter will therefore explore some of the practical issues that Royal Holloway faced in trying to develop a content selection policy for the project. Not only should this illuminate some of the practical concerns that underpin web-based archive access projects, but it should provoke some thought about how classificatory schemes and information systems can often play an invisible hand in predetermining the kinds of programmes television historians can find and look at.

The Challenges of Making Comparison Possible

Video Active consisted of a large number of project partners. By the end of the project's funding in August 2009 Video Active comprised eighteen partners from twelve countries covering eleven different languages.[10] Yet the make-up of the consortium raised some important questions about inclusivity, ideology and comparativity. This is because the twelve countries in the project did not constitute even half of the current number of twenty-seven member states of the EU. The project's subtitle was 'Creating Access to Europe's Television Heritage', but if the project contained fewer than half the member states of the EU it begs the question of what 'Europe' actually is here. Significantly there was an overwhelming bias in the consortium towards West European countries, with only one project partner, NAVA in Hungary, operating from the former Soviet-dominated Eastern Bloc.

Furthermore, at the beginning of the project two of the partners represented specific regional or language interests – TVC in Catalonia, Spain and RTBF representing Francophone interests in Belgium – so there were obviously problems of comparativity between regions (and language cultures) and states. Even in those instances where project partners were national broadcasters, such as the public service-oriented BBC (UK), ORF (Austria) and DR (Denmark), they did not represent other national or commercial broadcasting interests in their relevant territories.

Yet the inclusion of archive partners in the project was predicated very much on practical and operational principles. In the first instance the project partners had to volunteer content and services. So there had to be not only an interest in the aims of the Video Active project but the institutional and political will to commit to such an undertaking. This also had resource implications because the EU funding for the project did not cover the costs of digitisation of archive programme content. So archive partners who volunteered to participate either had already started digitising programme content or were planning to do so. In addition, each partner had to meet 20 per cent of project costs from their own budgets. This cost implication is important because the participating broadcasters and archives needed to cover some of the costs of staffing and resources, which can include research, transportation, telecineing, digitisation and checking of programme content within the physical world of the television archive.[11] Therefore, although partners were invited to sign up to the project, it was likely that these preconditions were barriers to participation for smaller and newer archives, or to those archives and broadcasters subject to tight commercial pressures.

The nature of the archives and broadcasters who did sign up to Video Active, however, had a profound impact on the project's content selection strategy and on the ability to undertake historical comparison. In the first instance, the holdings of the archives varied by historical period. For example, some of the archives hold material from the 1950s and earlier up until the present day, such as the BBC, DR, S&V and RTBF. Other archives, either as part of broadcasting institutions or independent holdings, started collecting material later. For example, SLBA (now part of the Swedish National Library) began collecting material in Sweden in 1979, TVC in

1984, DW in Germany in 1988 and NAVA in 2006. As a result, comparison of content from most of the archive partners in the project was easier and more comprehensive from approximately the 1980s onwards. Second, the holdings of each partner frequently varied by genre. Archive partners that are part of or affiliated to mixed programme broadcasters often have a wide sweep of different programme forms, such as the BBC, DR, RTBF and TVC. On the other hand, some archive partners have a more specialised focus in news (or newsreels) such as DW, HeNAA (Greece) and Istituto Luce (Italy). Third, intellectual property rights (IPR) caused enormous problems even for those archive partners that did hold programme material for a wide range of genres. Not only does the clearance of rights ordinarily involve a lengthy process but it can also be prohibitively expensive. This too favoured news content as rights issues relating to drama and comedy, for example, are often complicated (potentially involving writers, performers, music and co-producers) whereas news material may be less problematic (except where third-party rights apply in the case of feeds or footage bought in from agencies or other broadcasters). The situation continues to vary across Europe for different historical and cultural reasons.

For a project like Video Active, which proposed to put television content online, the problem is even more acute. When rights issues were agreed between agents, talent and production unions, performers and broadcasters in the past, they were not necessarily envisaged for foreign transmission or accessibility, and in many instances the internet had not even been conceptualised when block deals were negotiated and agreed. The historically, culturally and nationally contingent nature of rights was again echoed by Video Active. Content held in the BBC archive, for example, was subject to varying agreements, codes of practices and costs for its divergent range of genres; SLBA in Sweden has historically held no rights to any of the archive material it holds; and NAVA in Hungary had broad IPR arrangements, backed by government legislation, that allowed it to put content online. Furthermore, many of the partners found it easier to clear clips rather than whole programmes and, as a result, Video Active had to include both clips and full programmes. The main point here, however, is that as a result of the variability of the partner holdings and the attendant IPR restrictions it was simply not possible to undertake comparisons across all the project partners by period and genre.

Nonetheless, a content selection policy that was both inclusive and comparative needed to be developed. The response to this challenge was to develop an approach based on historical themes. The themes themselves were partly inspired by Eric Hobsbawm's historical analysis of the social, cultural, political and economic developments of the last century, *Age of Extremes*, and also subject themes that had been developed in other project work by Istituto Luce. As a result, thirty-four historical themes were agreed, which included the rise of youth culture, changes to the family and the greater role of women in society, as well as topics such as the Cold War and European integration. A grid was drawn up for the themes, which were spread across the last sixty years by decade. It was decided that each partner should select around twenty items of content for each theme to be spread across the decades for which they held content. So, for example, RTBF content on the subject of 'Drugs and alcohol' would be spread from 1950 to the present, whereas content from TVC would date back to 1984. For each topic short briefing notes were drawn up to help the archive partners select from their mass of holdings. The archive researchers were, however, encouraged to interpret their brief liberally and creatively, to try to include as wide a range of programme forms and examples as they could, and to try to consider a European dimension and historical interest where possible. Of course, there still remained a question as to whether a handful of programmes from a given decade could adequately or fairly represent the output of programming from a specific period[12] or treatment of specific themes. Indeed, a large question mark hung over whether any of the content selected could be considered representative of broader national or institutional programming cultures. Given that the programmes selected could in some way be seen to be emblematic of programming from a particular country or broadcaster, and that the programmes selected had to carry comparative weight, consideration needed to be given to contextual information and transparency of selection. In this area metadata was an essential feature of the project.

Metadata and the Contextualisation of Comparison

Metadata here refers to information about the primary form of data (the audio-visual content of the actual programmes), and in many respects this can be said to include basic cataloguing information about the programme content. In the Video Active project metadata explicitly related to the interpretation and contextualisation of content and to search and browsing functionalities. Basic production information such as title (in English and native language), original transmission date, broadcaster, genre, abstract of clip or programme, and description of wider programme or series where relevant were provided. Where possible, information was also provided about programme-makers and contributors such as actors, presenters or public figures. As well as providing information about the programme's provenance, much of this information could be used for search and browsing, such as transmission date, broadcaster and genre. Searching metadata fields across countries was particularly important here because it supported transnational comparison.

There were a number of practical and conceptual problems in delivering systematic metadata for interpretation, search functionality and comparison, and these required both pragmatic and innovative solutions. First, not all of the archive partners keep a wide range of production or cataloguing information. As Pierre Sorlin and Andy O'Dwyer have both pointed out separately, broadcasting archives and their practices and policies for preservation and access have developed at different times, and their approaches have often been influenced variably by how mature the medium was when they started broadcasting or preserving material. Archiving practices themselves have not been developed with the academic researcher or member of the public in mind, but have often evolved out of changing priorities in programme production and transmission and in the sale of clips and programme formats and series. As a result, cataloguing and metadata practices have tended to be developed for internal use by archivists and programme-makers within particular institutional cultures with a specific set of competencies and knowledge base. In Video Active, therefore, descriptive information about programmes or series was especially problematic because this kind of information is not always contained within an archive's programme catalogue. So while basic classificatory information was provided to support consistent and effective search functionality, the

provision of extensive and detailed descriptive information about programme content was unfortunately inconsistent across the project.

Second, although genre could not be the primary focus of content selection due to the variability of archive holdings, genre terms (and expectations about genre forms) are nonetheless likely to be recognised and deployed by users and researchers (see, for example, Creeber). Genre terms across Europe are problematic and slippery, however, so the issue required discussion and negotiation. A long list of genre categories was originally developed, but it seemed that content providers had difficulty in selecting the appropriate classification for their programmes. Particular areas of confusion included the annotation of series and serial forms of drama, and not all archive providers recognised terms such as soap opera or docudrama. Other areas of confusion included the difference between news, current affairs and documentary – with terms such as 'current affairs', 'observational' documentaries and 'factual' programming also not being universally recognisable. The solution was to include ten key genre categories in the metadata fields, but to supplement these with a search function that filtered a small number of special or 'feature' subgenres that would be recognisable to at least some users across Europe. The key genres were news, drama, comedy, entertainment, documentary, lifestyle, children's programming, advertisements, sport and interstitials, and the feature subgenres included soap opera, cop or detective series, sitcom and talk shows.

The third issue related to the typicality or representativeness of the programmes and clips selected by the project archivists and then retrieved by users. As previously noted, the programme content on Video Active could be seen as representative or emblematic in some way of national and broadcasting cultures. This issue becomes even more slippery when it is considered that programming forms, cultures and genres change over time. So the selection of programme content also had to address the challenge of representing both stability and change in a given national or cultural context. In most academic research, scholars themselves try to identify and access the programmes that best fit the object of their inquiry – whether it be to examine a specific television phenomenon at a particular time or to address issues of change and development over time. It is for this reason that John Corner ('Cultural Politics') has argued that it is necessary for researchers to select

their own content according to their own disciplinary principles (epistemologies and methodologies) without preselection by archive gatekeepers.[13] The difficulty for Video Active, however, is that the project necessarily involved pre-selection of content by archivists for a potential wide range of users.

To address this issue, it was decided to include metadata that made the process of preselection more transparent and to indicate the typicality or representativeness of the programme content being included in the project. So the archive partners were instructed to record instances where the programme selected was 'unusual, innovative or extraordinary' in some way. A number of searchable metadata fields were then devised for the partners to indicate the reasons for the programme's exceptionality. The fields included categories based on 'one-off' events, popularity and innovation (such as in genre, production, technology and style). The archive partners were also instructed to signify where the programme was of interest in a broader European context, specifically where the programmes constituted a format that had been traded across borders within Europe, or whether it was a format that had been imported. For the most part, however, for reasons of practical comparison and to reflect the experience of daily television and culture in Europe, the content providers were invited to focus on 'ordinary' and 'everyday' programme forms. A review of the content selection in August 2008, just prior to the public launch, indicated that only just over 10 per cent of the content selected fell into the 'unusual, innovative or extraordinary' categories. It was in this way, therefore, that the project hoped to offer typical forms of programming for comparison.

Conclusions

The Video Active web portal was launched to the public in September 2008 and proved to be a large-scale, ambitious and innovative transnational project. By the end of the project's funding in August 2009 there were over 9,000 items of programming online from across Europe that had previously been inaccessible to wide scholarly, educational and general publics. As well as creating access to programme content Video Active also brought together metadata from archives with different cataloguing and reference

systems in a usable manner to contextualise programming, to provide browsing and search functions, and to support comparison of European television more broadly. Indeed, the programming content and the contextual information on offer has the potential to provide insights into programming and television history across Europe on a scale that has never been achieved before. And it should provide a valuable resource for researchers and educators in television and media studies and in a wide range of fields concerned with European politics, culture and history.

As we have seen, however, the project was beset by a combination of practical, real-world archive issues and questions of both a historiographical and an epistemological nature. The variability of holdings and access policies across Europe was very much behind the project's rationale to create increased access for a wide variety of users. Yet the different holdings, cataloguing systems and IPR restrictions had a profound impact on the development of the project. Archives without the resources to support digitisation were unfortunately unable to participate and the different genre holdings of the partner archives and the variable IPR conditions from country to country made content selection primarily based on genre unworkable. The variable conditions of the partner programme catalogues and metadata schemes also led to some inconsistency in the provision of detailed and extensive programme information. A baseline of classificatory information was effectively achieved to undertake consistent search and comparison of content, but this too has raised questions about how broadcasters and archives understand and categorise programmes in different countries. Practical solutions to some of these problems included the development of thematic categories, the filtering of recognisable subgenres, the annotation of typicality and exceptionality of programme content, and an attempt to create transparency of selection criteria.

The lessons from Video Active were instructive, and in October 2009 a new and larger EU-funded project began which aims to provide access to around 30,000 items of content and will involve twenty-eight partners from across Europe, including broadcasters and archives from Czechoslovakia, Poland, Romania and Slovenia. The project, EUscreen, does not just constitute a continued collaboration between broadcasters, archives, technologists and academics, but also includes strategic collaborations with the European Broadcasting Union and the European Digital Library, and it is

holding a number of workshops and events to develop and promote international policy debate in areas such as IPR, metadata standards, digitisation and the sustainability of funding for online access activities.[14] It is intended that the new project will further promote comparative approaches to the analysis of European television history with user-generated and interactive features and with the founding of a dedicated academic e-journal. So while Video Active may not have provided the idealised access to television content around Europe that some may have dreamed of it marked a significant step in the right direction.

Notes

1 This chapter reflects the practical experience of television historians working with broadcasters, archivists and technologists to deliver European television programme content and information for historical comparison and research. It is not the role of this chapter to be critical of archival policies and practices or of funding structures.

2 See, for example, Corner ('Cultural Politics') for a recent overview of the complex issues relating to archival access, and see Brunsdon for a discussion of how lack of access has historically determined aspects of scholarly practice in television studies.

3 Screenonline can be seen at www.screenonline.org.uk/

4 Newsfilm Online can be seen at http://newsfilm.bufvc.ac.uk

5 Arrows is a collaboration between the UK's History of Advertising Trust and ChilliBean, a commercial digital asset management company. It can be seen at www.arrowsarchive.com./

6 See the websites http://www.ina.fr/ (INA) and http://www.beeldengeluid.nl/home.jsp (S&V) for more information.

7 See the project website at www.birth-of-tv.org/birth/

8 Video Active: Creating Access to Europe's Television Heritage. The project can be seen at www.videoactive.eu. At the time of writing it was under discussion as to whether Video Active content would in future be accessible via the EUscreen domain www.euscreen.eu.

9 Video Active project, Description of Work, 10 September 2006, p. 1.

10 See the project website for a full partner list.

11 See Andy O'Dwyer for the costs and resources involved in archive preservation and access.

12 John Corner ('Finding Data') in particular has warned of the dangers of undertaking historical research by decade.

13 See also the 'Lugano Manifesto' (Anon).

14 The project's full title is EUscreen: Exploring Europe's Television Heritage in Changing Contexts. The project is being led, again, by the University of Utrecht, and RHUL is leading a large work package entitled Information and Access. This involves working with Cinecittà Luce (formerly Istituto Luce), the BUFVC and the University of Utrecht on a number of issues including metadata schema definition, content selection, selection oversight and content contextualisation. At the time of writing the EUscreen portal can be visited at www.euscreen.eu

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